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Chairman Andrew McDonald, Chairman Michael Lawlor, Ranking Member John Kissel, Ranking Member Arthur O'Neill and other distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition of *SB 349, An Act Concerning the Penalty for Possession of a Small Amount of Marijuana*.

WE CANNOT LEGALIZE MARIJUANA BECAUSE IT'S USE HAS DESTRUCTIVE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

In April 2008, the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime stated why we should care about cannabis.

Approximately 4 per cent of the world's adults - some 162 million people - use cannabis at least once in the course of a year, making it the world's most widely used illicit drug. In some countries, more than half of all young people have tried it. In spite of this high rate of usage, many basic facts about cannabis remain obscure. Of particular concern are the recent growth in the drug's potency, and mounting questions about the role of cannabis in mental illnesses.

In recent years, research has demonstrated that cannabis is becoming more potent. Studies done in key markets such as the Netherlands, the United States and Canada, for example, have shown that the potency of sinsemilla cannabis, made from the unfertilized buds of the female plant, has doubled. The market for this high-potency, indoor-produced variety appears to be growing in many key consumption countries. As the drug grows stronger, users consequently experience more powerful - and dangerous - psychological effects. Emerging research indicates that cannabis consumption may have greater mental health implications than previously believed.

Although it is often seen as a less harmful drug, cannabis use poses several health risks. Even when used only once, cannabis may lead to panic attacks, paranoia, psychotic symptoms and other negative acute effects. The drug may also precipitate psychosis in vulnerable individuals and intensify symptoms in diagnosed schizophrenics. As it is mostly smoked and contain high levels of tar, cannabis additionally puts users at an increased risk of lung cancer and other respiratory diseases.

The risk of becoming dependent on cannabis is also higher than most casual users suspect. Regular users risk developing psychological dependence to the point where they cannot quit even when the drug use starts to negatively impact in other areas of their lives, such as work and personal relations. Around 9 per cent of those who try cannabis are unable to stop using it, and demand for treatment for cannabis-related problems has increased in recent years in the US and Europe. [FN1]

MARIJUANA IS MORE POTENT AND IS AN ADDICTIVE DRUG

Marijuana is far more powerful today than it was years ago and it serves as a an entry point for the use of other illegal drugs. This is known as the "gateway effect." Despite arguments from the drug culture to the contrary, marijuana is addictive. Unlike those addicted to many other drugs, the marijuana addict is exceptionally slow to recognize the addiction. This addiction has been well described in the scientific literature and it consists of both a physical dependence (tolerance and subsequent withdrawal) and a psychological habituation. [FN2]

According to a US report released in June of 2008, the levels of THC - the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana - have reached the highest ever amounts since scientific analysis of the drug began in the late 1970s. The average amount of THC has now reached average levels of 9.6 percent (the highest level in one of the samples was 37.2 percent). This compares to the average of just under 4 percent reported in 1983. Additionally, higher potency marijuana may be contributing to a substantial increase in the number of American teenagers in treatment for

marijuana dependence. According to the U.S. 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), among Americans age 12 and older there are 14.8 million current (past-month; 6.0 percent) users of marijuana and 4.2 million Americans (1.7 percent) classified with dependency or abuse of marijuana. Additionally, the latest information from the U.S. Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS, 2006), reports that 16.1% of drug treatment admissions were for marijuana as the primary drug of abuse. This compares to 6% in 1992. A similar trend is taking place in the Netherlands, where new data indicate that the number of people seeking assistance for cannabis there has risen, from 1,951 in 1994 to 6,544 in 2006 -a 235 percent increase. [FN3]

In 2006, the average THC concentration in Dutch marihuana was 16% which is even higher than that in the US. [FN4]

Marijuana is an addictive drug. It poses significant health consequences to its users, including those who may be using it for "medical" purposes. In the U.S., marijuana is the number one drug that young people are in treatment for. [FN5]

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York reported that adolescents who used marijuana at least once in the last month are 13 times more likely than other adolescents to use another drug and almost 26 times more likely than those adolescents who have never used marijuana to use another drug. [FN6]

The use of marijuana in early adolescence is particularly dangerous. Adults who used marijuana early were five times more likely to become dependent on any drug and eight times more likely to use cocaine and fifteen times more likely to use heroin later in life." [FN7]

In the US in 2003, approximately 3.1 million people aged 12 or older used marijuana daily or almost daily in the past year. Nearly two-thirds of those daily marijuana users, "used at least one other illicit drug in the past 12 months" and more than half (53.3 per cent) were also dependent on or abused alcohol or another drug compared to those who were nonusers or used marijuana less than daily. [FN8]

The damage to health caused by marijuana

Drug legalization advocates claim that marijuana is less dangerous than drugs like cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Some European countries have lowered the classification of marijuana based on the perception that it is less harmful. However, studies over the last few years give us a lot of new information about marijuana. They show that marijuana is not harmless but that it is toxic and addictive. Recent studies listed in the end notes to this section show the following destructive effects of marijuana use:

- birth defects
- the worsening of pain
- lung damage
- links to cancer
- AID - marijuana opens the door to Kaposi's sarcoma
- brain damage
- strokes
- immune system damage
- mental illness
- violence
- infertility
- addiction [FN9]

Marijuana and mental illness

A number of recent studies link marijuana use with schizophrenia as well as depression and suicidal ideation. Weekly marijuana use among adolescents doubles their risk of developing depression and triples the incidence of suicidal ideation. [FN10]

A study in 2005 showed that 80 percent of people with schizophrenia were regular marijuana users when they were adolescents with 75-80 percent of them using marijuana habitually between the ages of 12 and 21. [FN11]

Respiratory problems

In recent years there has been a great public effort to curtail tobacco because of its effects on health, yet, the advocates of legalization promote smoking marijuana which is more dangerous to health than tobacco. For example, a recent study shows that marijuana smoke has ammonia levels 20 times higher than tobacco smoke. Marijuana has hydrogen cyanide, nitric oxide, and aromatic amines at 3-5 times higher than tobacco smoke. [FN12]

Another study shows that that marijuana smokers face rapid lung destruction - as much as 20 years ahead of tobacco smokers. [FN13]

Smoking marijuana is also associated with an increased risk a host of same respiratory symptoms as tobacco, including: coughing, phlegm production, chronic bronchitis, shortness of breath and wheezing. In addition, marijuana plants may be contaminated with a range of fungal spores and thus smoking marijuana may also increase the risk of respiratory exposure to infectious organisms such as molds and fungi. [FN14]

According to the US National Institute on Drug Abuse, someone who smokes five joints per week may be taking in as many cancer-causing chemicals as someone who smokes a full pack of cigarettes every day. Marijuana smoke has more than 400 chemicals, including the most harmful substances found in tobacco smoke. [FN15]

Risk of birth defects with prenatal illicit drug use

A recent study shows that marijuana use during pregnancy increases the risk for birth defects associated with the central nervous system, cardiovascular system, oral clefts, limbs and the gastrointestinal system. [FN16]

Brain damage

Marijuana use may narrow arteries in the brain similar to patients with high blood pressure and dementia and may explain why memory tests are hard for marijuana users and chronic marijuana consumers of cannabis lose molecules called CB1 receptors in the brain's arteries that leads to problems in the brain with blood flow that can cause memory loss, attention deficits, and impaired learning ability. [FN17]

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